DEPARTMENT OF

APPLIED IT

ACCELERATED DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SENSEMAKING

A case study of a pharmaceutical company

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Abstract

Digitalisation is a pervasive phenomenon that is challenging firms to radically transform themselves to stay ahead of competition. This study aims to fill the research gap that exists within the field of organisational change and more specifically on accelerated digital transformation. The eight sensemaking mechanisms by Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) are used as an analytical lens during the collection and analysis of the data. A qualitative approach in the form of a case study was conducted within the Recruitment department of a global pharmaceutical firm. Data was gathered mainly through semi-structured interviews covering several hierarchical levels of the department. The results of the study show that accelerated digital transformation is an emergent process that requires focus and efforts from several levels of a firm and that time and resources should be allocated on it to succeed. Furthermore, the sensemaking mechanisms of *Translation, Stay in motion, Encourage updating* and *Learning* were observed to have a stronger effect on accelerated digital transformation than the others. Middle management is crucial in enabling sensemaking processes and fostering fast change thanks to their situational awareness and knowledge of the teams. Finally, the individual capabilities of learning agility, tech-savvy and change mindset were observed to have a positive effect on accelerated digital transformation.

Keywords

Change Management, Accelerated Digital Transformation, Sensemaking, Sensegiving

Foreword

We would like to thank our supervisor Aleksandre Asatiani who has been always available through this journey and provided us with guidance and valuable feedback.

Further, we would like to express our gratitude to the company for giving us the opportunity to conduct this case study in the singular situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. A special thank is directed to our mentors, who always had an open ear for us and supported with information and contacts needed to conduct our study in the best way.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge our family and friends for their support and understanding during this challenging yet exciting and developing journey.

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1 Introduction

Digitalisation is ubiquitous in today's society and is referred to as the fourth industrial revolution. The first industrial revolution was propelled in the late 18th century by steam and waterpower, the second was enabled in the late 19th century by electricity, mass production, and division of labour and the third was initiated in the 1960s by electronics, IT and automation (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020, p. 10). Hence, adapting to change and new situations is something that humankind has experienced for a long period of time, yet, digitalisation is strongly challenging all industries nowadays (Academy of Management Discoveries, 2018; Birkinshaw, 2017; Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020).

The pace at which technology is advancing makes it particularly challenging for organisations as they must transform themselves rapidly to take advantage of the opportunities provided by technologies or even to simply survive (Shahi & Sinha, 2021). This change process, companies have to undergo, is referred to as Digital Transformation (DT) (Vial, 2019).

Even though change is a top priority of management agendas (Shahi & Sinha, 2021), it is estimated that 70% of change initiatives fail (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, p. 35). Although the latter number has raised disputes, organisations are still struggling to get the best out of their change efforts. A central part of the existing literature provides models focusing on planned change, which considers change as a linear and progressive movement from one state to another through a certain number of steps (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Vial, 2019; Weick & Quinn, 1999). However, change is also seen as a continuous activity that is driven from the bottom-up (Weick & Quinn, 1999) and the planned approach models fail to address this perspective. It is relatively easy to implement new technology, but it is a more complex endeavour to make sure that people adopt it as it requires transforming mindsets and habits of doing business (Kane, 2019). Therefore, people are the real key to undergo DT successfully (Bonnet & Westerman, 2021; Kane, 2019) but "management often fails to win over the hearts and minds of the people in the organization" (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, p. 2) as they tend to focus on driving change through the implementation of prescriptive models.

Furthermore, the planned change approach does not provide the higher flexibility that is needed for organisations to match the increasing pace of changes in the external environment (Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, 2020). Although Kotter's eight-step model (Kotter, 2012) may support firms to drive fast change when the sense of urgency is high, there are still gaps in understanding how organisations can increase their pace of change to match that of the environment. In particular, the area of accelerated DT and what factors foster or slow down the change process are widely unexplored (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study aims to examine which factors support or hinder coping with accelerated DT. A multi-level perspective is taken to give valuable insights into how employees experienced accelerated DT. The objectives are to contribute to this relatively unexplored research field and to support companies with practical knowledge in how to succeed with accelerated DT. This will be done through a case study in the Recruitment department of a global pharmaceutical company by investigating how employees experienced accelerated DT in three selected digital projects. Due to the lack of models and consistent literature covering these topics, we will perform a bottom-up study based on our research case. We will use the eight mechanisms of sensemaking as a lens of observation and analysis.

The research question this study aims to answer reads as follow:

How do organisations succeed with accelerated Digital Transformation?

We will next provide a background of related work, considering organisational change and DT, followed by a brief overview of the literature on sensemaking. Further, the eight mechanisms for leading sensemaking will be presented in more detail as our analytical lens for this study. Next, we will present the research setting followed by the data collection and analysis. The results of qualitative in-depth interviews will then be illustrated. Subsequently, we will highlight the implications for theory and practice as well as limitations and further research for accelerated DT in our discussion section. The final chapter concludes.

2 Literature Review

In this chapter, related work in the field of change management, DT, as well as sensemaking and sensegiving, will be presented. First, a brief overview of organisational change theory and its complexity in the contemporary fast-changing environment is presented. Afterwards, the characteristics of DT are highlighted. Lastly, the concept of sensemaking will be introduced, followed by a separate chapter presenting the eight mechanisms of sensemaking as a framework for our study.

2.1 Organisational Change

Many existing change models stem from the work of Kurt Lewin and his "three steps model", seeing change as a linear and progressive movement from one state to another through a certain number of prescriptive steps (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). Although planned change has many followers, it has also received numerous critiques (Bamford & Forrester, 2003). One of the main criticisms is that the planned approach does not fit well with the fast-changing, turbulent and uncertain business environment (Garvin, 1993). Another criticism focuses on the centrality of empowered managers in planned change and the fact that the approach seems to ignore the significance of external forces that are outside the sphere of influence of managers (Wilson, 1992, pp. 37–41). Advocates of the emergent approach believe that change is a continuously evolving activity that is driven from the bottom-up. Change is, indeed, the result of many loosely coupled acts that happen at a micro-level and create momentum through accumulation (Weick & Quinn, 1999). When seeing change as an emergent phenomenon, leaders become sensemakers who can sense change and translate it for employees and stakeholders (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

In the complexity of the current business environment, leaders are usually faced with changes that are both planned and emergent at the same time. A typical example of this is the implementation of information systems in organisations. Implementing a new information system requires a planned approach in terms of establishing and executing a plan, but its success will also depend on the openness of managers and their sensemaking capability. Managers must stick to the plan and at the same time, they must be able to re-write it. By being at the front line of change, observing and listening to employees, leaders make sense of emerging evidence and translate it into action and a new direction (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). Another argument is that there is no standard recipe for managing change. Every situation is unique and the best approach to apply must be selected based on the specific circumstances. Furthermore, change can appear as planned or emergent based on the level of aggregation and on how closely one observes this change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). From a top management perspective, change may appear as planned but at the forefront, where the change occurs (team leader perspective), it will be perceived as continuous evolving (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

2.2 Digital Transformation

Digitalisation is ubiquitous in today's society and triggers individuals, organisational, social and societal change (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020, p.2) that companies need to manage to succeed in this highly competitive environment (Birkinshaw, 2017). Researchers and practitioners use the term digitalisation to describe a bandwidth of change challenges. It ranges from minor adjustments in internal processes to the complete transformation of industry sectors. (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020, p.2). The disruption brought by digital technologies forces organisations to rethink their strategies and to restructure themselves to achieve new value creation paths and, in this way, to stay competitive. This process is also commonly referred to as DT. Vial (2019) has provided an outright definition of DT after reviewing 282 papers on the topic. He defines DT as "a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies". The notions of change and transformation are usually used interchangeably especially by organisations. While change has been largely researched, there is still much to be understood about transformation (Ashkenas, 2015). Change is associated with shifting from one state to another through the execution of relatively well-defined activities, while transformation is about reinventing the organisation in unpredictable, iterative and experimental ways (Ashkenas, 2015). Consequently, transformation is a greater and more disruptive type of change. DT differs from IT-enabled change in that it happens in conditions of uncertainty and is somewhat affected by trends external to the organisation (Vial, 2019). Furthermore, DT reflects the disruptive power that digital technologies have on individuals, organisations and societies. As Bharadwaj et al. (2013) suggest, digital technologies have the power to largely affect the scope of the changes they create and the pace at which they occur.

Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2020) have extended their model of the four change scenarios by applying it to digital change. The authors indicate that DT is a continuous and incremental process and that its scope and magnitude lie outside the existing strategy, structure or culture of the organisation (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020). The intended outcome is to revive and relocate the organisation to stay competitive, which requires changes in current ways of thinking and working as well as "on-going alteration to products, services, capabilities, and resources through digitalization". (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2020, p. 92) According to the analysis of Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2020), DT is both, a planned and emergent type of change because the organisation strives to relocate the competitive advantage through planned activities while continuously modifying and extending capabilities step by step, thereby reacting to the evolving developments in the environment.

Although many organisations tend to focus their DT efforts on technology, Kane (2019) shows us that people are the real key to DT. Kane (2019) identifies three business issues that organisations must manage in order to succeed with DT. Firstly, firms must be able to

navigate digital disruption by adapting and responding to new situations created by digital technologies. He highlights the pace of business as a key component, where it is important to balance the rate of technology evolution, individual's adoption and the organisation's ability to adjust to the changes (Kane, 2019). Reshaping leadership and talent is a second key component. Implementing new technology is relatively easy, but changing employees' way of working is a more difficult endeavour. Dynamic capabilities, defined as sensing changes, seizing opportunities and transforming the organisation, are identified as important mechanisms through which companies can innovate and adapt to changes in their environment (Vial, 2019). Dynamic capabilities are important as they support firms in adapting fast to an environment that is in continuous change. At a micro-level, there is still little research done on how to build and develop these capabilities (Vial, 2019). Becoming a digital organisation is the third challenge and entails a cultural shift fostered by structural change, agility, experimental mindset and learning (Kane, 2019; Vial, 2019).

2.3 Sensemaking and Sensegiving

As discussed earlier, DT is an emergent process, it is therefore interesting to observe it through the lens of sensemaking.

The concept of sensemaking stems from the work of Karl Weick. Sensemaking literally means the making of sense and is the process by which people give meaning to what happens around them. It is about structuring the unknown, and sensemaking researchers are interested in understanding how and why this happens and what effects it has (Weick, 1995).

There are several definitions of sensemaking depending on what aspects they are focused on but the perhaps most comprehensive one is the following:

"Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances." (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409)

As Weick et al. (2005) state, "sensemaking starts with chaos" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 411). In situations where ambiguity, incomplete information and mixed messages arise, people may feel confused, and become triggered to make sense out of what is happening. Sensemaking is an ongoing process as it is through the act of doing something that people start understanding what happens, creating structure and a pattern of meaning. "In simpler words, sensemaking creates some sort of order of the flow of events that we are undergoing, and in so doing the world becomes structured in such a way that it becomes meaningful and workable." (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, p. 47)

Within the contexts of organisations, change typically triggers sensemaking. Indeed, change generates ambiguity and uncertainty and employees try to make sense of it by interacting with colleagues. Organisational sensemaking is believed to be more complex than individual sensemaking, due to the larger number of actors, events, symbols and implications involved (Weick, 1995, pp. 63–64).

The concept of sensegiving is strongly correlated with that of sensemaking and has been defined as the "process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning of others towards a preferred redefinition of organisational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Although sensegiving is recognised to be an essential leadership activity used by leaders during both times of change and stability, it appears to be used by other stakeholders as well (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), leaders affect stakeholders sensemaking through their sensegiving activities. In turn, employees and stakeholders will also try to influence change through sensegiving. Change leaders will then understand the stakeholders' feedback and make sense of it. This describes a reciprocal process of sensemaking and sensegiving, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Garvin, 1993; Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

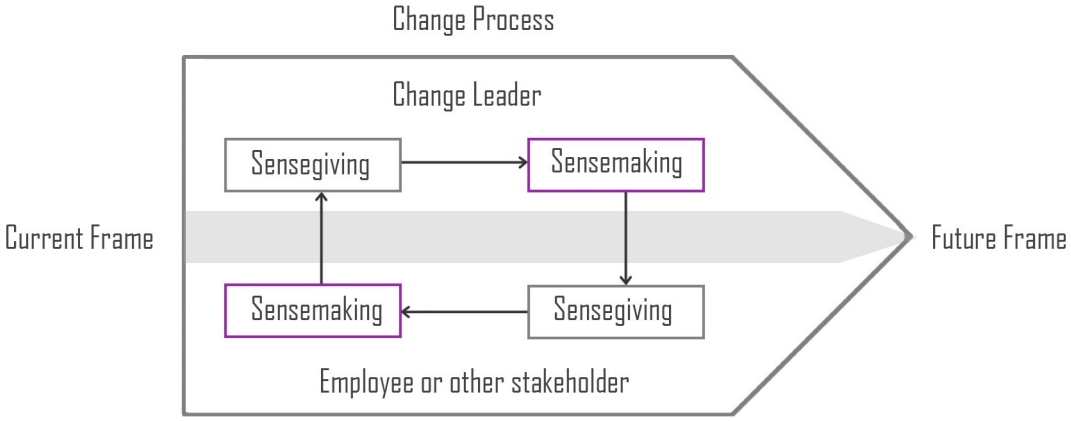

Figure 1. The reciprocal process of sensemaking and sensegiving. (Garvin, 1993; Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016)

2.4 Mechanisms of Leading Sensemaking

Despite the increased research efforts in the area of DT, there is still a gap in understanding the human side of change and how organisations can accelerate DT.

Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) suggest eight mechanisms through which organisations can nurture meaningful sensemaking. Four of them are Weick's bare-bones conditions: Stay in motion, Have a direction, Look closely and update often, Converse candidly (Weick et al.,

2000, p. 232). Leaders are important enablers of these conditions. As previously discussed, there is no universal remedy for change, but any model will work if it is used by leaders to enable these conditions. Weick et al. (2000) advocates that the four bare-bones conditions are the heart of the relationship between leadership and sensemaking. Weick recognises that sensemaking occurs in both planned and emergent change but that the four bare-bones conditions are more often activated by emergent change (Weick et al., 2000, p. 232).

Based on dominant sensemaking literature, Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) add on four mechanisms that seem to be recurrent themes resulting in their eight guidelines for leading sensemaking.

I. *Logic of attraction*

   The logic of attraction is somewhat opposite to the logic of replacement, which is a dominant concept in planned change and involves the idea that change is managed by telling people what to do. According to the logic of attraction, the leader is a role model that inspires people to change. Change can only be led by attracting people to it, "to lead change is to show people how to be" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 380). Successful change initiatives start with committed and trustworthy leaders. Indeed, leaders must set an example and transform themselves if they want others to change (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

II. *Provide a direction*

   Having a strategic direction and alignment of change leaders is key to successful changes. A clear and shared direction instils confidence in people by decreasing confusion. Leaders shall create awareness and understanding that a change is necessary. They do it with the help of symbols and maps that deliver cues for people to understand where the organisation is heading (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

III. *Translation*

   Translation is an important component of the sensemaking and sensegiving processes performed by leaders (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Leaders can translate change ideas and strategic plans that are already prevalent in the organisation in a way that is more understandable and manageable at the front line. One of the properties of sensemaking is plausibility rather than accuracy, therefore leaders' ability to translate long-term strategies and visions into concrete and workable action plans makes change more understandable for employees. Translation can foster the engagement and actions of people. It is important that the leaders have a good knowledge of the organisation and the change recipient culture and history in order to achieve a successful translating activity (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

IV. *Stay in motion*

Change initiatives are often hindered by routines, plans, structures and slow decision making. Leaders shall prevent inertia by encouraging people to act and experiment and removing obstacles that hamper action (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

V. *Encourage updating*

Leaders shall incite people to stay informed, pay attention to how things are evolving, be agile and avoid drawing conclusions too early. Therefore, it is crucial for change leaders to be at the front line of change in order to stay continuously informed. Having good situational awareness enables them to change plans if needed and to take swift action (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

VI. *Facilitate respectful interaction*

Establishing open and respectful interaction among employees is key to effective organisational change. Leaders shall encourage people to be candid and open to others' views and interpretations, and foster an environment of trust where people feel comfortable sharing their opinion (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

VII. *Improvisation*

Unblocking improvisation is about narrowing the gap between planning and execution so that the stages of composition and implementation of change converge. A way of achieving this is to give early adopters the freedom to experiment with ideas. It is, therefore, crucial to loosen up plans, routines and process that might hinder action-taking. In this perspective, improvisation is somewhat connected with staying in motion (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

VIII. *Learning*

Learning is important because it has the power to affect the shared mental models and consequently the organisational response to change. In this vein, leaders should encourage double-loop learning. The ordinary type of learning takes place within an existing frame and it is about doing things better. Double-loop learning on the other hand refers to a more profound kind of learning that ultimately leads people to do things differently. Learning therefore can alter employees thinking frameworks and understanding changing the way interpret what happens around them and how they will act. Formal training is also important as it can help to solidify a new pattern of behaviour (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

2.5 Summary of Literature Review

In summary, in a rapidly changing and complex environment, a constant adoption to new circumstances is vital for organisations to stay successful. Therefore, several authors analysed how change happens and how the evolution of digital technologies is impacting change. According to Bharadwaj et al. (2013) digital technologies have the power to largely affect the scope of the changes they create and the pace at which they occur. Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2020) concluded that DT is a planned and emergent type of change because the organisation strives to relocate the competitive advantage through planned activities while continuously modifying and extending capabilities step by step to react to the evolving developments in the environment. To be able to do this, organisations must rethink their strategies and restructure themselves which requires a change in how business is done from a technological but also working behavioural perspective (Vial, 2019). According to Kane (2019), people rather than technology are the real key to a successful DT. A change in the way of working requires ongoing behavioural rethinking and alterations in terms of learning and capability development. Therefore, people's perspective and involvement in the change process are essential. Knowing why and how changes are necessary in the short and long-term helps people to embrace them more easily and to create some sort of order in the flow of events and make sense of what is happening, according to Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016). Thus, to undergo DT successfully, leadership is a key component in providing people with this knowledge. The challenge for organisations is to balance the rate of technology evolution, individuals' adoption and the organisation's ability to adjust to the changes. The pace of business is a key component. The reciprocal process of sensemaking and sensegiving supports coping with change and make it easier for employees to adopt. Leaders will try to influence the sensemaking process of employees to answer the why and how by sensegiving and also employees will try to influence the sensemaking process by giving feedback on their understanding of what is happening. This creates a continuous exchange about what is happening and why, which in its turn helps employees adapt to changes (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). The eight sensemaking mechanisms are processes through which leaders can nurture meaningful sensemaking.

3 Method

This section will present the methodological approach divided into the three subsections Research Setting, Data Collection and Data Analysis. Additionally, insights into the structure of the case company and how the data has been collected and analysed will be given.

With the aim to understand how employees succeed with accelerated DT, we performed a qualitative case study in a global organisation operating in the pharmaceutical industry. As Yin (1994) suggests, a case study "is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary within its real-time context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". This approach enables us to answer our research question by getting an in-depth understanding of how employees experience DT and shedding light on their sensemaking process.

3.1 Research Setting

This thesis research was carried out at the Recruitment department of a global pharmaceutical company, hereafter called FARMA for reasons of anonymity. The company has operations in several parts of the globe and three main Research & Development (R&D) hubs. The Recruitment department includes roughly 200 employees and has the responsibility to support the firm with recruitment, employer branding and attracting early talents. The Recruitment department is structured in a way that mirrors the business areas to provide the best services, as illustrated in Figure 2. This means that each Group led by a Manager supports a distinct business area of the company, for example IT, Operations or R&D. The Groups are organised in smaller local teams each headed by Team Leads. The Groups are also organised in a matrix structure which means that team members are usually spread over multiple countries. The Recruiters main responsibility is to perform recruitment, the Team Leads act as team leaders for the Recruiters but also perform recruitment on a part-time basis. Managers are acting more on an overall strategic level for the Groups globally.

The company focuses on DT, which can be observed in several parts of the organisation. By the same token, the Recruitment organisation has launched several digital projects in the last two years with the overall goals of increasing efficiency and improving the candidate experience. Improving the candidate experience means to design the recruitment process as smooth and enjoyable as possible for the candidates to attract the best talents. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Recruitment department to accelerate the implementation of certain systems resulting in a busy overall project portfolio plan for 2020-21. Furthermore, the entire firm had to switch to remote working starting from February 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

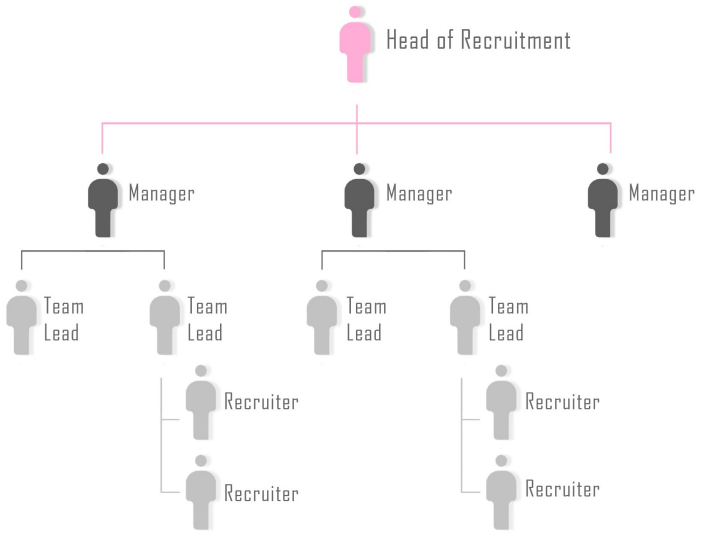

Figure 2. Simplified Organisational Chart of the Recruitment department.

To have a better focus and maximise the outcomes of our observations, we decided to study three select projects out of the project portfolio of the Recruitment department, which are introduced in Table 1. The projects were selected because they were different in their kind and at different stages of implementation. Additionally, it was possible to identify interviewees in different countries who are in touch with all projects in some way. This allowed us to get perspectives from individuals on multiple projects at once and to gain insight into how change is perceived at different times and across different projects.

Table 1
Introduction of the three projects.

Project A
This project aims to automatise the contract and offer letter generation for successful candidates. This is a built-in functionality (System A) in the already existing HR platform 'Workday' used by the Recruitment department, which was enabled, tested and implemented in this project. The expected outcome of this project is to increase efficiency by making the process simpler and quicker while creating consistency in the onboarding of new employees.
At the time of this thesis research, the system is implemented across the entire organisation, however, the implementation plan has been gradual, meaning that some interviewees have used the system for a long time while others have just started using it.

Project B The project aims to deliver a candidate relationship management tool (System B) to build better ongoing relationships with past, current and potential candidates. The expected outcome of this tool is to maximise the database and scaling up talent pools. From a long-term perspective, this shall reduce the time it takes to hire and maximise the potential of all interested talents in the company. Project B is implemented across the entire organisation and the implementation has been gradual in the same way as Project A. Therefore, some interviewees already had more experience in using the tool than others.
Project C The objective of this project is to implement an AI recruiting assistant (System C) that will help recruiters to scan candidates and automatically schedule interviews with potential candidates. The expected outcome of this project is to be more efficient in considering every application, which is especially a challenge in countries with a high volume of applications. Project C differs from Project A and B in terms of being a pilot project. The focus lies on experimenting and testing the system's feasibility to scout where it can unfold the greatest benefit for the company. Therefore, the system has been implemented only in the pilot areas which is mainly the Recruitment Team responsible for recruiting for IT roles.

The projects described above followed the process described in Figure 3 and had a similar layout.

Figure 3. Development process.

All projects were managed by a Project Lead, belonging to the Recruitment organisation who acted as a link to the Technical Project Lead, belonging to the IT organisation as illustrated in Figure 4. The Project Lead had a team of Subject Matter Experts (SME), typically those are Recruiters nominated by their direct Manager to take part in the project. SMEs were involved starting from the initial phases and contributed by setting requirements for the system based on their team's needs. The users are mainly Recruiters and Team Leads.

"So, the project team was really made up of an SME per function and they became a key point of contact, they became the individual who translated the philosophy into work in practice [...] the SMEs were critical to really embedded that (local) level." – Manager

SMEs also largely participated in the testing phase (sometimes additional users were involved as well) and provided feedback for further improvement. So, the SMEs went through the learning journey before roll-out and became a central role in the Post Go-Live Support.

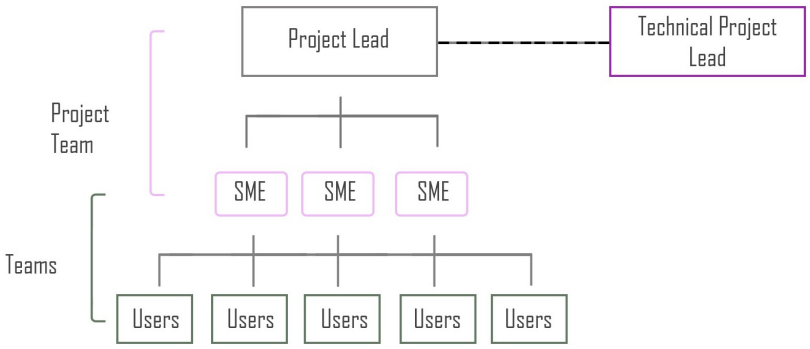

Figure 4. Project structure hierarchy.

The training phase consisted of users performing online training. For Project B, people felt that the online training was long and that it contained a lot of information that they did not have time to assimilate, so most of the learning was lost before they started to use the system. They would have preferred a more flexible e-learning training divided into modules covering different system functions, so that they could have been accessed when needed, to have a smoother learning process overall.

"The online training, but there was provided by the supplier was very long and it just felt, actually it was really good to just go into the system and see what it looks like, but it was too long and too detailed to go through before you're able to enter the system." – Team Lead

3.2 Data Collection

The main data collection was made through 20 semi-structured interviews that lasted around one hour each. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is a more open dialogue with interviewees to raise unplanned question according to what has been said by the interviewee. This allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewee's experience and, thus, helped us answering our research question (Elliot et al., 2016). Due to COVID-19 related restrictions, all interviews were conducted using the video conferencing software - MS Teams. The cameras were on which allowed us to reach a better connection with the interviewees and to see their facial expressions and body language. We were able to record 19 out of 20 interviews and transcribed all of them to text for an in-depth analysis. In total, we analysed 239 pages and 131 545 words of transcribed interviews. The numbers were determined automatically with the help of MS Word.

In order to secure multiple perspectives in our data collection, we selected interviewees based in different countries, namely Sweden, Great Britain, Mexico and the USA, covering all hierarchical levels of the Recruitment department, as listed in Table 2: Recruiters, Team Leads and Managers. We also interviewed the Project Leads for the projects observed in the study to get their views and hands-on information on their area of responsibility. Since the Recruitment department is organised to mirror the business areas, we decided to interview employees from different Groups to get a fair distribution and a more representative data collection. The selection of the interviewees was done in two parts. The first eight interviews were organised by our company supervisor, who serves as a Manager for one of the Recruitment Groups. The remaining 12 interviews were organised by us, from a list of potential candidates we received from our supervisor. The Project Leads were determined based on our decision for these three specific projects.

Table 2
List of interviewees.

Role	**Number**
Recruiters	9
Team Leads	4
Managers	4
Project Leaders	3

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to be at the company site and could not be naturally integrated into the daily business. Wherefore we additionally interviewed our company supervisor to gather as much information about the Recruitment organisation as possible. This supported us in being able to set up the data collection correctly. Furthermore,

we interviewed the Director of Systems & Processes within the Recruitment organisation to achieve a better understanding of the overall project plan.

We also got access to the following information which we reviewed carefully to increase our understanding of the organisational structure and the strategy.

- Organisational chart of the Recruitment department
- Project portfolio
- Project charters
- HR strategy

3.3 Data Analysis

We used the method of thematic analysis to identify and analyse themes within the collected qualitative data, which were guided by the eight sensemaking mechanisms provided by Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to meaning generation (Clarke & Braun, 2017), which we found useful in our study since the interviews performed were semi-structured and the interviewee sample was relatively heterogeneous. We reviewed the data and organised it in three different ways. First, where the data was easily classifiable as one of the sensemaking mechanism, codes were created equivalent to the related mechanism. Second, where more detailed data was identified, subcodes were created and later consolidated in larger codes according to the eight mechanisms. Third, due to the focus on three specific projects, equivalent codes according to the projects were created. The codes were developed by one of the authors of this thesis while reading five transcriptions, followed by a discussion and agreement on the final code book. Afterwards, the remaining transcriptions were divided among the two authors of this thesis and coded independently according to the said code book. We coded the entire interviews, not just parts of them, and we did it in a few consecutive days without any significant breaks. The process of coding the transcriptions was iterative, which means all transcriptions were read several times to make sure we identified all important data and coded accordingly to the agreed code book.

4 Results

In this chapter, the results of this study will be presented. First, an overview of the overall digital ambitions at FARMA will be given, followed by a more detailed presentation of the three observed projects, to enable a better understanding of the general context. Afterwards, the eight sensemaking mechanisms will be used as a structure for presenting how the interviewees experienced these digital projects.

4.1 Digital at FARMA

Although three specific projects were observed more closely, the context in which these systems were implemented is important in understanding the case and identifying the factors relevant for coping with accelerated DT.

All interviewees believed that the company has strong and bold digital ambitions. Digitalisation has affected several parts of the company, from R&D, where AI and digital tools have enabled leaner trials and faster drug developments, to manufacturing. Digitalisation is one of the main pillars in the HR strategy, aiming for smarter and more efficient work while improving user experience by optimising and automating processes and transforming work through digital and intelligent automation.

Employees agreed that digitalisation has transformed the firm by fundamentally changing what they do and how they do it.

"We're really pushing the boundaries in terms of using new tools and using data to develop new tools as well or new routes. So, I think it has transformed us both in terms of the ambition of how we do things and also what we do." – Team Lead

There is a general understanding of the importance of digitalisation and why the firm is focusing on this transformation.

As for most parts of the organisation, digitalisation has affected the Recruitment department as well. This journey started about five years back with the implementation of a global system (Workday) which is today the platform through which new tools are implemented. Most of the interviewees agreed with the fact that the digital tools brought on the way are aiming to make the Recruiters' work more efficient.

"There is an ambition to improve the candidate experience and to streamline [Recruiters'] work." – Recruiter

Some of the tools are automating processes to save the recruiters' time, thereby allowing them to be more focused on candidate experience and building close relationships. In the last years, many new digital tools have been introduced, and although employees recognised

their necessity, they also felt overwhelmed by the number of new systems that needed to be learned and integrated into their daily work.

"To be honest sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming that before we were able to truly understand a new tool, another one is coming up already." – Recruiter

4.2 The Three Projects

Project A, as previously explained, is a built-in process for automating contract generation in the existing HR Platform 'Workday' which had to be activated. This process will completely replace the currently existing process for contract generation. We observed that this project was perceived differently across the interviewees. We have been able to identify several reasons.

First, it is crucial how good the previous existing process worked and how well-functioning the team was.

> *Exactly, I think that the difference between our country and in the other two hubs, for example, was that our collaboration with our administration team is so well working, and also so well set up that the things we need to do with contract today they fixed and did it even better. – Team Lead*

Second, it matters which impact the new development has on the daily work. Generating the contract is a crucial part because it is the step when the candidate will finally sign. It can have uncomfortable consequences when the contract is generated wrong.

> *[...] it's a crucial part in the process overall in the hire process. But then also that you are comfortable and familiar with the current process and then 'someone' comes, 'someone' you're being told that this is going to be switched around, things get unfamiliar, you're not sure of how everything works, what you're supposed to do, it's a system thing also which I think is scary because you can't affect it by yourself. – Recruiter*

Third, the visibility of the benefits plays a role. For some interviewees the benefit was directly and easily visible, while others needed to be shown the bigger picture.

"Great, loved it. I think it's brilliant I think it has speeded things up, it has reduced human error [...]." – Team Lead

> *For our team, it's definitely not time efficient, but I know also that sometimes with some systems we need to look at it on the broader picture [...] if we need to put in 10 more hours a year if this group then saves 20 hours, that's still a win for [the company]. – Team Lead*

Project B was perceived differently from Project A because it did not replace a pre-existing process which made it inevitable to adopt System A. Project B is an entirely new tool although it does build upon the existing HR platform 'Workday', with multiple functions and fields of application. Consequently, it requires more learning and time to unravel its full potential, especially, when compared to Project A and C. Furthermore, it has a significant impact on the way of working and the job performed by the Recruiters and Team Leads. Until now candidates applied for positions and were successful or not. In the future, the Recruiter shall look ahead and actively getting in touch with potential candidates for jobs that are not yet existent, to build up a pipeline for faster recruitment.

> *We're not taking anything away. So, if a recruiter chooses to carry on in the standard way of working he will still have a level of success in that role, it just wouldn't grow [...] our capabilities so we've been very conscious of that in the change management that this is, as you say, a new way of working, not just a change of technology. – Manager*

"[...] because I still find talents without using [System B] in the way maybe we are expected to." – Recruiter

"[...] I felt that it was going to make massive changes for us and it really has made changes for me." – Recruiter

The challenge with this project is to engage and motivate the use of the new tool and to enable its full potential. The understanding of why, where and how to use it were identified as essential for the users. Since it is an entirely new way of working and there are no existing guidelines, everything must be built up and defined from scratch.

"[...] but I think the crucial part here is to work more on the operational parts, on how to use the system and also as I mentioned before examples of when it works, how to do it and what materials to use." – Recruiter

"[...] it's a behavioural thing as well because you aren't used to actually activate [System B] in your daily work." – Recruiter

Project C differs from Project A and B in terms of being a pilot project, which means that it is only implemented for testing in the pilot locations and only for IT roles. Testing means that this project is already actively used for real applications but gets proved by the Recruiter to monitor the functionality and accuracy of the tool. Therefore, only a few users are working with this tool. Nevertheless, we could observe a general knowledge amongst the interviewees about the tool's objectives and could, therefore, gain insights into what the interviewees think about it. Project C has in common with Project B that it changes the way Recruiters work. Usually, CVs are read by the Recruiter and then considered as qualified for an interview or not. This step shall now be taken over by an AI chat bot. In particular, this

means that the AI chat bot proves through a conversation with a potential candidate if the candidate fulfils the required mandatory hard skills or not. If the candidate is successful, the AI tool will automatically schedule an interview in the calendar of the Recruiter. Therefore, the main challenges in this project are to understand what the tool really does, which is linked to the trust in the tool and in which area it can bring the most benefit.

"[...] to be honest it was a new technology, so there was still some kind of concern in the team that it wasn't gonna be how to do what they wanted it to do." – Project Lead

"[...] this is a pilot. So, we will review at some point whether [...] this is the way we wanna go and whether we will look at an enterprise level or whether we look at other solutions." – Project Lead

"Uh, not completely, no. It's still new, still needs some, some heavy lifting, but I don't trust it fully, yet." – Tag Partner

"Personally, I'm a little sceptical about whether it will be successful in every situation or whether it will have its place in the high volume, high application numbers." – Manager

4.3 Sensemaking Mechanisms

The adoption of the new digital tools is occurring during the Post Go-Live Support phase, thus, the most crucial step in regards to sensemaking. To facilitate the presentation of the results, we will divide them according to the sensemaking mechanisms.

I. *Logic of attraction*

Most of the Managers and Team Leads learned how to use the systems or had plans to do it. Some of them used the systems and some had an overall understanding of how they worked. Having knowledge of the systems helped Managers to get a better understanding of the efforts required of Recruiters to learn them and how they would affect their daily work. Some Managers said that acquiring knowledge about the systems would enable them to optimise implementation and to make the best use of them in their team.

> *[...] think it's really important to understand what [Recruiters] do, how they work and actually I will need to use it at some point I'm sure [...] because as a strategy we need to know what's the most effective way we're going to use the system and what do we want out of it [...] And if I don't know that it's going to be very difficult for me to drive the team to utilise and optimise the system. – Manager*

Some Managers believed it is important to focus on trying out new tools to stay ahead and they encouraged their team to do the same. Employees were also inspired by Managers who motivated the team to participate in projects, to test and learn new tools.

"It's great for [the team] to stay ahead or be seen as the kind of the people that will try it out and give a really honest view." – Manager

> *[...] my manager said: 'we want to try it [...]'. In the global calls, they were like inviting some countries to be trying the tool and to be figuring out how it could be fitting in our process [...] and she is very, very proactive on that [...] she is very supportive [...] confident to be getting us to be working on our own on that and to be deploying it to the team [...]. – Recruiter*

II. *Provide a direction*

We previously presented how employees experience digitalisation at the company and that there is a spread knowledge and understanding about the company's strategy and direction on digitalisation. While they acknowledged the importance of digitalisation in the Recruitment community, some Managers felt that the digital development within the Recruitment department has been organic and that an overall strategy is lacking.

> *I think I would like it to be more a strategic approach to digital [...] I would like it to be more holistic, more joined-up, more integrated and I think we need to you know we as an organisation we need to invest in it. So, if we want to really optimise technology, we need to put some money behind that and some resources behind it, in order to be more planned and strategic and focused [...]. – Manager*

Some Managers and employees expressed that it is hard to grasp the overall picture and how all the new digital tools are connected. So, they indicated the need to consolidate the technology stack and to provide the Recruitment community with the knowledge and understanding of how to use the tool kit in the most appropriate way to achieve an optimal candidate experience.

"[...] We could very quickly have a complex tool kit at our disposal, and I think there needs to be a balance of giving our recruiters and community the best tools available but not overloading them [...]." – Manager

"[...] they've had access to so many things that are we really utilising them to the maximum you know, do [Recruiters] really understand where best to use them? You know how they work? Because they've got so much choice now." – Manager

Looking at providing a direction on a lower level, all Project Leads agreed on the importance of working on establishing an understanding of why a tool is implemented and the benefits it entails. They recognised this need in the development and testing phase where they had to put efforts into getting the SMEs' buy in to secure their engagement in the project. This was also identified as an important element in the Post Go-Live Support phase where Team Leads

and Managers, through the support of SMEs, become change agents. In many interviews, the importance of Managers reinforcing the message, increasing awareness around why a tool is being implemented and what benefits it brings was highlighted.

An aspect that slowed down adoption was users' distrust in the new tool. This could particularly be observed in Projects A and C, where the tools touch upon a core activity or delicate step in the candidate process such as contract signing, candidate screening and interview scheduling. In this case, communication was revealed to be very important.

"And I guess when we went through this subsequent roll-outs we spend more time on the why and what is the value output for the individual rather than just the how." – Project Lead

> *Yeah I guess [the trust was affected] if I am being honest. Yeah. I mean only in certain locations because I would say some locations they are fine like [location 1] and [location 2] you know they love the tool, they see its value in it but in some locations there was some negativity towards it. – Project Lead*
>
> *I mean honestly, I have had a couple of issues where somethings been inaccurate in that contract or it hasn't landed in the candidates Inbox for some reason or other. It's not reached through our system or it's not gone from the system. But we're in a relatively new phase of this, so you know, we have to accept that there will be some teething problems. [...] every contract really comes back to the [Recruiter] for a check before it goes to the candidate to make sure that that [Recruiter] has checked it and knows that that data is accurate. – Manager*
>
> *And that's the bit that [Recruiters] are a bit skeptical about because they don't want their calendar filling up with lots of irrelevant people. But what we're going to do is very much say, well, just give it three or four slots in the first, you know, just give it a number of slots and try it." – Manager*

The involvement of ambassadors, like the SMEs, or people sharing their experiences and success stories around a specific tool, helped employees understand the benefits of the tool.

> *[...] I think it's also if someone being the forefront of showcasing the return of invest. Then I think it also inspires others to start using it. So, I think a very good thing would be more examples of like you know sunshine stories and like insights how the talents appreciate things [...]. – Recruiter*

III. *Translation*

As explained earlier, these tools affected teams and employees in different ways. This is connected to the fact that all teams have different needs and histories. The same applies to individuals who may have different capabilities and conditions.

> *As SME for [Project B] I performed the Train the Trainer sessions and trained my team. The team was very fast in adopting the new system. But other teams behaved differently and had questions such as "why do we have to use the system" and "can we do it in this way instead. – Recruiter*

It is very clear from the data collected that the Managers played a key role in getting their team on board with the change. Managers were expected to drive adoption and partner with their SMEs. Collaboration between the SME and the Manager played an important role in the Post Go-Live Support phase. Where Managers had created a clear structure with objectives and goals and followed up by measuring it against the performance of the individual, the rate of adoption was higher. Creating clarity on expectation motivated employees in learning a new tool.

Interviewees felt overwhelmed by the number of new tools they were expected to learn over a short period of time. Some recognised the importance of good time management, while others said that they are not skilled at managing their time and struggle in prioritising these activities. Some Managers and Team Leads supported their teams by taking a more structured approach to the change through the creation of plans with short-term deliverables. For example, they decided to learn the system function by function.

> *[...] I think it is really important to break these things down into really clear deliverable, short-term goals as well. Because I think if you just tell somebody, OK, we're doing this now and this time next year we're going to be pipelining all roles, and we're not going to be, you know, reactively recruiting everything. That just sounds unattainable, unachievable, but I think breaking it down, saying right this month, we're learning how to use [System B], next month we're deciding what roles were going to build pipelines for, the next month we're creating those pipelines and the recipes and then all the sudden you find yourself a year later, and you're doing what you set out for really [...] I think breaking it down into those short-term deliverables [...]. – Manager*

"Sometimes maybe too fast and sometimes maybe a lot of things going on at the same time which can also cause like a stress to be able to learn new things quickly and several new things parallel to each other." – Recruiter

"I think in the past we have just had a lot of new things to get our head around and the teams have had a lot of new technologies and digital pieces to understand." – Manager

"I do know a few members are really struggling more due to time, they just haven't have the time to play on the system and get used to it and now they feel a bit behind and now they are struggling and don't are not quite sure what to do." – Manager

Some Managers and Team Leads supported their teams in decreasing the threshold of learning a new tool by collectively using the system and practising during the hyper care calls organised by the SME.

"Now we just have these sessions and just to put in the calendar also, to find the time to put candidates in the system. So now we have these time slots, and everybody just sits and work in the system." – Team Lead

IV. *Stay in motion*

In the Post Go-Live Support, users are learning the new tool and embedding it in their everyday work. As mentioned earlier, a key factor of success was the involvement of SMEs in this phase, they facilitated the process of adoption, for instance, by being available and organising hyper care calls. They supported individuals and teams in their learning process by answering questions and creating more structure.

> *But from the moment of go live rather than just handing over to the users and saying go ahead, SMEs would bring the user group together once a week or bi-weekly to say right today we're going to spend, we're gonna build an event, we're going to run this search to spend time actually in the system. – Project Lead*

From the interviews performed, it is clear that Managers have a key role in moving their teams ahead. Some Managers set team goals and KPIs for adoption. However, following up on goal achievement was not done in a consistent way throughout the organisation, affecting negatively the rate of adoption.

> *[...] from a leadership perspective, for example, they say oh we're going to measure you in this KPI related to [Project B] but then there isn't any leadership following that up actively. So it's more hand it to you and you know what's expected but then again you do not see any KPI's individually [...]. – Team Lead*

What was also observed is that employees who have a higher digital competence, an easiness to learn digital things and openness to change, adopted the systems faster than others and felt less stressed about the changes brought by it.

> *Fundamentally I believe there are two elements that impact individuals adoption. It's their digital maturity, their awareness of technology, their capability on the variety of platforms combined with then the learning agility. So whether it's a digital technology or an alternative process change if that individual is in a*

> *position of this the way I've worked for 15 years their adoption is going to be more challenged than somebody who in a four-year period has had three or four different ways of working. – Manager*
>
> *I absolutely love learning new things. I love getting new tools [...] I really look forward to those times where I can learn about something new, that Workday is doing that's going to make my life sort of easier so I can focus on the sort of the candidate side of things [...]. – Recruiter*

"So you know you have some people in the team who any piece of tech they instantly you know they are the early adopters and really passionate about it." – Manager

"[...] I have people like this early talent, named [...], who is always open and happy to help and learning and but you know it's part of her way of being." – Manager

"And that it's like generates anxiety to me but I try to deliver to the team that part. I know I have people who get it faster, who like it, who enjoy it [...]." – Manager

On the other side, the lack of these capabilities, led in certain cases to resistance to change and Managers handled it by encouraging employees to give it a try and to embrace change to prevent inertia.

> *[...] there is this resistance and I'm just trying to say embrace it. Try it, because if it doesn't work then we look at it. You know if we fail and it's not effective then we change it. But if we don't try it. And if we don't embrace it. Then we're going to always do what we've always done, and we're never going to get you know that digital mindset, I think, is the it's sort of how do we go [...] from doing digital to being digital. – Manager*

Another factor affecting the speed of adoption is employees' work pressure. The project portfolio is reviewed at the Recruitment management level, and a staggered approach is preferred so that the same team is not adopting several new systems and ways of working at the same time. Despite this, having too much to do and not being able to spend time on learning the new system was a recurrent raised issue and a common reason for postponing the adoption of a system. Some Managers mentioned the need of being careful when new things are rolled out. Managers addressed this stressful situation by postponing the deadline for employees struggling.

"I just extended the deadline [...] and said I know you were supposed to complete it by this date but just let extend it by a month which will give you more time to do it." – Manager

V. *Encourage updating*

Across the performed interviews, it could be observed that it is crucial to keep the new systems up in mind and motivate people to use them. After trainings have been completed and access has been granted, employees might have a knowledge of how the system should work and what benefits it brings, but this does not necessarily mean that it works as it should work in real life. Technical issues can create resistance and hinder people using a system because they cannot gain the expected benefit in terms of making their life easier instead of just feeling frustrated because they do not get it to run correctly.

> *I mean, I know one of my colleagues [...] was trying to create an event that he wanted to host [...], but then you know the pictures weren't working. You know just all these small details about the end of the day he just gave up if he's like, I've spent half a day on it and I can't get it to look how it should. – Recruiter*

Therefore, it is essential for Managers to stay informed about what is happening at the forefront to take action and respond to needs if required. Acting agile in terms of requesting feedback and adjusting a system accordingly in the best possible way, is a way for Managers to do this and prevent frustration and avoid drawing conclusions too early.

"So what we've done is to set up regular so weekly team meetings where we address ongoing questions, issues, things like that. We've also had well, we also have a weekly or biweekly learning and development sessions where we go through things." – Team Lead

> *[...] if we don't it sort of you know, then, that motivation level drops or they use it, but they won't use it [...] and still go back to doing what they did before. [...]. Because actually if somebody says well, this isn't working for me and this is why. Can we should it be a different type of conversation in different locations. – Team Lead*

The spread of negative experiences can harm accelerating the adoption and can create resistance as well. Having an open dialogue within the team helps to identify these kinds of issues so that they can be addressed in time.

> *Well, I was a bit afraid at first because there was a little buzz within the internally that it was gonna be a huge change and that it was gonna be much more complicated for us and yeah I think that people were scared that it was going to be more complicated and take more time. – Recruiter*

VI. *Facilitate respectful interaction*

Employees and Managers often talked about the difficulty of balancing between operational work and adopting new tools. This situation has overwhelmed employees but having an open

dialogue within the team and support from their Team Leads and Managers helped them to handle those feelings. Many employees mentioned that they got support from their Manager when they needed it.

> *So I do think it's also being it's being conscious about all the different types of people who are gonna be using the technology and also the different pressures that people are under. So you know you have some people in the team who any piece of tech they instantly you know they are the early adopters and really passionate about it. You just give it to them and they gonna work out how to use it. And then there are other people in the team who really need to have their hand held a little bit more and walk them through until they get used to it. – Manager*

Thus, Managers play an important role in addressing employees needs and making the best use of their skills, for example, by giving early adopters and technology savvy employees the opportunity to engage in projects and try new tools while providing less digitally mature employees with more support.

Additionally, the exchange among team members created a mutual feeling about the situation which helped to handle sometimes overwhelming situations.

"[...] sharing sessions to be sharing with everyone how we were feeling with the tool, what questions we have, so that also helped." – Recruiter

> *[...] it's nice to feel that I am not alone in that sense. And it's also good because some of them have maybe explored like [System B] a bit more than myself and then I can get the learning from them. So that is also good that we can collaborate together and learn from each other and hear what they have learned and then maybe I don't have to do the same mistake so to speak. So it helps a lot to speak with my colleagues. – Recruiter*

Furthermore, the knowledge of whom to contact with what problem gives a feeling of safety and accelerates the adoption because employees know that they will get help and do not lose too much time in figuring out how to solve the problem on their own. The experience among the employees differed in this respect depending on the team and project.

> *[...] essential for our adopting process is this weekly touch-up point that we have with the project manager and the developers to be asking questions and, as I was telling you, everything flows really, really fast and when we get to have a question it has to be maybe a couple of minutes or at most a couple of hours that we can get the answer or get something fixed. So, that has been like the process and a thing that has been helping a lot that we have very, very close contact, locally and globally. – Recruiter*

> *So that the support team is from within our own team, so they say they've been part of the implementation and they are everything you can wish for and more. But with that said, they are still, I mean that they haven't been using this system forever and ever themselves either, so it would, and they have their day jobs to do as well, so this is just on top of that. Yeah, it would definitely benefit, beneficial to have a kind of dedicated support during first period where both we as talent acquisition partners but also candidates could contact them when we struggle. – Team Lead*

VII. *Improvisation*

By creating an environment where experimentation and failure are encouraged Managers can accelerate but also slow down the transition from planning to execution of new tools.

> *So I think the team that already had that kind of mindset of "it's OK to fail, it's OK to try something new; if it did not work, let's just not do that again". I think that's one of the reasons why potentially we were selected as one of the early adopters was just they knew my team. We're ready to do something different to try something new. – Manager*

> *[...] people were not confident to use the system they have rather held back from using it until they know more rather than trying it and testing it day-to-day. They were a little bit reluctant, and I think a little bit nervous to use a system that they don't fully understand because we've made such a point of saying we want*

> *to make sure we're consistent, we want to make sure that we do things consistently and together. – Manager*

In the beginning of this chapter, we explained how important it is that Managers engage themselves in the change, which also means that they can participate in the experimentation by applying different approaches in how to roll out new technologies and to see what works best for their team.

"[...] both teams went as phase one and we took a slightly different approach to it on each to see which would maybe work better [...]." – Manager

Furthermore, leaders fostered systems' adoption by loosening plans and processes according to the local circumstances to create the best possible atmosphere for the team to adopt new technologies. This implied changing the roll-out plan but also allowing the adjustment of parts of the system.

> *[...] so really kind of that part of the build going away, playing with it, coming back to the table and say well actually I prefer it like this or you know can we do*

> *this differently? Yeah and still kind of continuing to learn and trial it so that we know what's working and you know we report back [...]. – Recruiter*
>
> *[...] we're not going to go live until we know that this has been tested well. So we did another round of testing for [this country] and I think the team that [Recruitment] team also took the learning from that and they were really great at the testing, they were really engaged, raising a lot of issues for us, letting us know exactly what was working, what wasn't working and so that round of testing was absolutely brilliant. – Project Lead*

VIII. *Learning*

Learning was a central theme during the interviews. We observed all the different ways in which the Recruitment community organised itself to support the learning journey of Recruiters from hyper care calls, to chat support groups and more. Many employees said that it takes time to learn a new system and that practising is crucial.

"I think that's a lot of learning at the fronts and then it's turning once you start getting your hands on these things that you can start playing around with it and really kind of understanding more how you can use it on a day-to-day basis". – Recruiter

At the same time, there seemed to be an expectation for employees to be self-learned. The trainings were delivered through e-learning, and many employees felt it was a lot to be taken in.

"You're very much on your own development and your career here [. . .] the huge training platform that we have access to [. . .] it's very much down to the individual to be disciplined and to reach out for that." – Recruiter

> *[...] the largest time is like maybe three hours but most of them are around an hour and an hour and a half to deliver all the knowledge and they assume we understood. And they assume that we are getting it. So you have to become really self-educated and you have to get back and try to understand that your pace [...]. – Manager*

As already mentioned earlier, the e-learning were in some cases perceived as long and inflexible, the timing was not always right, and the time spent on it was in some cases unproductive.

"I think that the process of learning has been good but sometimes I feel like you can be introduced to a lot of things but for me, they aren't valuable at the time [...]." – Recruiter

Another finding is that employees have different levels of learning agility and different preferences in how to learn new things. Many employees indicated that they prefer to learn a new tool through interaction with a colleague rather than through e-learning. Managers and Team Leaders addressed this by enabling shadowing of employees who are more knowledgeable about the system.

"[...] I have also suggested we have talent scouts who will obviously using [System B] a lot more day to day and so I have also suggested a shadow and have a look to see how they use [System B]." – Team Lead

4.4 Summary of Results

In summary, the data collected shows that FARMA's high digital ambitions have led to the implementation of several digital tools within a short period of time creating overwhelming feelings for many interviewees. There is a good structure in terms of project management with the involvement of SMEs representing their teams. The system adoption occurs mainly during the Post Go-Live Support and in this phase, it has been observed how leaders encouraged change through different mechanisms. Overall, leaders had a good structure to stand upon and that they were empowered to do what was necessary to support the implementation of new systems. However, middle managers, particularly in teams with high workload, struggled to free up their employees so that they could spend more time on learning the new systems. Thus, the partnership between Managers and SMEs was crucial, since SMEs supported the work by providing knowledge about the systems while Managers created plans and followed them up to keep the teams moving forward. Creating short-term deliverables for the team and following them up helped employees to have more clarity on what needed to be done and when. Managers and Team Leads created an atmosphere of openness so that employees could talk about their struggles and issues, and this helped leaders to address resistance or issues. Providing time for learning a new tool through for instance hyper care calls was helpful to keep employees on track. Also, being attentive to employees' preferences in terms of learning processes was important to sustain the adoption rate. Nevertheless, it was observed that the formal training need further improvement. Several managers and team leads stated that the capabilities of tech-savvy, learning agility and change mindset helped employees adapting easier and faster to the new systems than others without those capabilities. This was also confirmed in the interviews with recruiters.

5 Discussion

In this section, the findings of the case study will be discussed with a focus on what factors supported and accelerated DT. This study provided insights into how employees experienced three different digital projects at FARMA. The eight mechanisms of sensemaking were used as a framework to better understand the phenomenon. They will be used as a guide to structure the discussion and to answer the research question:

How do organisations succeed with accelerated Digital Transformation?

The main findings show that, although the DT that FARMA is going through has been embraced by employees, it has created fatigue and overwhelming feelings within the Recruitment community. It was also observed that all sensemaking mechanisms contributed to support DT however some of them played a more crucial role to accelerate change. Furthermore, certain individual capabilities were shown to facilitate the transformative process. These concepts will be further elaborated below.

As Vial (2019) suggests, the disruption brought by digital technologies pushes organisations to rethink themselves to stay competitive. Likewise, the FARMA Recruitment department has been leveraging digital technologies to create new value creations paths, increasing efficiency to be able to meet the growth of recruitment needs in the future and enabling candidate relationship processes to attract rare talents. However, as Kane (2019) mentions, it is crucial to find the right balance between the rate of technology evolution, individual's adoption and the organisations' ability to adjust to the changes. The Recruitment community has been exposed to an increasing number of digital tools in the latest years, most of them introduced through projects like those observed in this case study. Although these changes were introduced through a planned approach, it could be observed how all these changes at a micro-level created momentum, as Weick and Quinn (1999) explained, leading to an ongoing and emergent transformational phenomenon.

This case study showed that leaders, Managers and Team Leads, played a crucial role in fostering transformation by enabling employees' sensemaking processes, as Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) suggest. Leaders inspired employees by being forward-looking and change-oriented (Kane, 2019). Having a profound knowledge of the teams, individuals and operational work helped Managers and Team Leads to achieve a successful translation and learning experience (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

Leaders encouraged employees to engage and act by creating plans with short-term goals that were understandable and achievable by the team, for instance by gradually adopting different functionalities of the tool or having a structured approach to candidate pools creation. Furthermore, in many cases, Managers chose to learn the new systems to be able to support their teams in implementing them and making the best use of them. As Kane (2019) stated, it is vital that digital leaders have an overall understanding of what technol-

ogy can do. Managers acted as role models by learning the tools and being positive about the ongoing changes (Weick & Quinn, 1999), this, in turn, inspired employees to engage in the implementation process and to have an optimistic attitude to DT, according to the mechanism of logic of attraction (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016).

It was also observed that setting short-term plans was not enough to keep on with the change. Following up on employees and teams working towards the achievement of those short-term goals was crucial in order to stay in motion. Additionally, these systems were on the agenda of group meetings, team meetings, hyper care calls and one to one meetings, becoming a shared focus for the Recruitment community. An open dialogue between the team members and their Managers and Team Leads was thus a key process to enable a reciprocal sensegiving and sensemaking process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Having a shared focus on the systems and an open dialogue about them also enabled the mechanism of encourage updating. By being at the forefront of change, leaders were able to perform sensegiving and act fast to avoid hinders. This was helpful to promptly handle resistance from employees which was observed in several cases, for instance when employees were encountering technical issues or doubted the plausibility of a system.

Unblocking improvisation contributed to motivate employees working on the adoption of the new tools (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). For instance, having an experimental mindset allowed leaders to choose the approach that best suited their team. However, improvisation was also acting as a deterrent of change when, for example, a Manager decided to postpone the implementation plan for his or her team.

Learning could be identified as a key mechanism through the entire adoption process and was enabled in different ways. As previously mentioned, a structure in terms of achievable short-term goals and support meetings like hyper care calls facilitated employees learning process. On an individual level, the data collected showed that interviewees preferred different ways of learning and that it was important for leaders to pay attention to these needs and address them through for instance shadowing or pairing up colleagues. Enabling learning in different ways is crucial to keep up with the fast-changing environment and moving forward to a digital organisation. Without learning people just repeat what they already know and will fail in the DT process which requires a new way of thinking and working (Birkinshaw, 2017; Garvin, 1993; Kane, 2019). It is in the act of doing something that people start understanding what is happening (Weick et al., 2005), thus practising was mentioned as an important element to make sense of the systems. Regarding formal training, the time gap between formal training and the first activity in the system could be identified as an obstacle to a fast adoption process. A modularised e-learning could be a way to decrease the time between theory and practice. Organisations should make learning a meaningful corporate goal to achieve the ability to continuously adapt to changes (Garvin, 1993). In the case of FARMA e-learning and Learning Management Systems are in place and available for all employees at any time

to work on their personnel development. However, this assumes that as soon as people have access to learning, they will be motivated and incentivised to self-learn.

As mentioned earlier, knowledge about the teams, team members and their context was key for leaders to enable sensemaking processes. Likewise, it was important for leaders to understand the nature of the system being implemented and how it affected their team of responsibility in order to choose the best approach for enabling fast adoption. It was observed that certain sensemaking mechanisms were more helpful than others depending on the impact and size of a system. For instance, in this case study, System A and C were relatively easy to learn technology-wise, but they entailed a change in employees' core activities and, in some sense a loss of control which created resistance. In this case, *Providing a direction, Unblocking improvisation* and *Encourage updating* through an open dialogue were crucial mechanisms. Project B entailed the implementation of a completely different way of working supported by a large and complex system. The study showed that *Translation, Stay in motion* and *Learning* were key mechanisms to accelerate the adoption of System B.

The accelerated DT within the Recruitment organisation entailed changing the way of working and introducing many digital tools within a rather short time interval. As mentioned earlier, having access to many new digital tools and having to learn how to use them and then embed them in the daily work, created overwhelming feelings among most of the interviewees. This phenomenon is commonly defined in literature as technostress. According to Fuglseth and Sørebø (2014), technostress negatively affects users' willingness to use a system and that leaders can inhibit techno-stressors by providing technical support, facilitating literacy and enabling participation and involvement in process changes. This case study confirms that providing technical support, for instance, through hyper care calls, support chat and so on, facilitated the learning process. Furthermore, enabling feedback loops and involving stakeholders (i.e. SMEs) in the development of the tools contributed to increase employees' confidence and thus decreasing their stress levels. Furthermore, having an open dialogue within the team and support from the Manager was also an important factor to handle this stress. Managers must address technostress to keep the change running, however, this study demonstrates that technostress slows down the transformational process.

The balance between efficiency and innovation is vital to keep up with the rapidly changing environment, wherefore it is relevant to consciously put resources on both (Luger et al., 2018; Sinha, 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2018). With the decision to implement those tools, FARMA proved to understand the importance of innovation, however it was observed that employees had to allocate time on top of their daily responsibilities for learning those tools and a new way of working. Thus, time was consistently rare, which was an obstacle to a fast adoption amongst the employees. FARMA is therefore facing a dilemma regarding time and balancing innovation and efficiency. For leaders, it was difficult to get around it even if they supported their employees in better managing their time or by expanding deadlines, it

was not in their mandate to increase available time to focus on innovation at the team level. This is connected to the second key component, reshaping leadership and talent, which Kane (2019) identified in order to succeed in DT. It is extremely difficult to change the way of working therefore top management needs to commit time, energy and resources to work on this (Kane, 2019).

Personal capabilities had a strong effect on how employees succeeded with the observed transformation. Employees who were more tech-savvy and had a higher digital knowledge were positive about digitalisation and new digital tools. Some were eager to try it from the beginning (early adopters) and they learned new tools faster than others. Also, employees with agile learning capabilities had a more disciplined approach to learning and found it easy to learn new things. People with a change mindset experienced change in a positive way and tended to get on board earlier than others. It could be observed that leaders made beneficial use of these capabilities by choosing those employees as SMEs and pilot users or putting them together with people lacking those capabilities. This supported a faster adoption of the systems in the entire Recruitment community. Nevertheless, a focus on continual developing these capabilities across the entire organisation as a long-term goal is key for becoming a digital organisation (Bonnet & Westerman, 2021; Kane, 2019).

5.1 Implications for Theory and Practice

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, this study extends the literature of DT by exploring the phenomenon of accelerated DT (Kotter, 2012; Vial, 2019) in firms with focus on the people side of change. The findings confirm that in order to succed with DT it is crucial to focus on people (Bonnet & Westerman, 2021; Kane, 2019). This study extends extant literature and provides more detailed insights in how organisations can focus on people through the lens of sensemaking by identifying different factors that hinder or foster acceleration. Furthermore, it confirms that sensemaking mechanisms support accelerated DT even when a sense of urgency is not there.

Second, this study extends the literature of Sensemaking by investigating the role of sensemaking and sensegiving mechanisms in accelerated DT (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016, 2020; Weick et al., 2000). Accelerated DT entails a major shift in the way of working during a short period of time. In order to enable this shift, a continuous focus on the change is necessary for two main reasons. The first reason is to promptly identify and address any kind of issues that may slow down the pace (technical problems, lack of time, resistance to a new system etc). The second one is to create momentum by prioritising the change activities so that employees feel accountability and get the support needed to get on with the change. An important implication of this study is that certain sensemaking mechanisms are more important than others to accelerate change. From an overall perspective, the mechanisms that greatly support this progression are *Translation, Stay in motion, Encourage updating* and *Learning* (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016) so these are key factors for accelerated DT.

Third, this study validates the centrality of middle managers in fostering accelerated DT by establishing the right sensemaking mechanisms (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2016). On a micro-level, depending on the team, individual and type of change, the mechanisms may be more useful than others. The reason for this is that the implementation of a digital tool might be perceived differently between teams because of their history and context, the same applies to individuals, based on their past and capabilities. Furthermore, every digital tool has certain peculiarities and its implementation might entail a diverse set of challenges. Therefore, the most relevant sensemaking mechanisms also depend on the nature of the tool being adopted.

Implications for Practice

This study presents several implications for practice. Firstly, as middle managers play a key role in the pursuit of accelerated DT it is important that they are given the resources and the mandate to do so. Empowering middle managers to nurture sensemaking and sensegiving processes, for instance through the establishment of proper structures, is therefore the baseline to stimulate change.

Secondly, to get team members on board of a change, leaders should translate the bigger picture into short-term plans and deliverables that are understandable and achievable by them. Leaders should then ensure a continuous and shared focus on the plan, through open interaction, and follow up on the achievement of set objectives. This will motivate employees and incite teams to move forward all the time.

Thirdly, managers should pay attention to learning as this is the most important component of the accelerated DT. As learning is an ongoing process happening in all steps of the change journey, leaders should have a continuous focus on it. As employees learn in different ways, it is crucial that leaders create the right conditions and offer support for every employee to have a productive learning journey. Since employees with learning agility, tech-savvy and change mindset succeed better with accelerated DT, it could be beneficial for leaders to concentrate learning efforts on the development of these capabilities.

Fourthly, accelerated DT entails a profound shift in how things are done during a short period of time, it is a process that requires efforts at all levels of an organisation hierarchy and time must be allocated to support it. It is therefore crucial that top management establishes the right balance between operational work and innovation.

Lastly, it is essential that top management and middle management are aligned on the communication of digitalisation efforts. Having a strategic focus on digitalisation and communicating it systematically throughout the organisation provides employees with an overall direction. It is as important that middle managers communicate and provide a direction on a micro-level to help employees making sense of a specific change.

5.2 Limitations and Further Research

This study is not without limitations. We observed the phenomenon of accelerated DT within the Recruitment department of a global pharmaceutical company, so our findings are related to this context and might not be generalisable for other settings. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study in other contexts for instance in firms operating in other industries.

At the beginning of this study, we did not expect that technostress would be a finding, and we did not have the opportunity to look deeper into this theme. However, we believe it would be beneficial to research further into the relationship between accelerated DT and technostress.

Furthermore, as Vial (2019) also states, there is little research done on how to build and develop dynamic capabilities. We believe it would be beneficial to research further how the individual capabilities identified in this study (learning agility, tech-savvy and change mindset) affect accelerated DT and how they can be developed.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we did not have the opportunity to visit the offices which we believe would have enabled a better understanding of the culture of the organisation.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of accelerated DT in organisations with a focus on the people side of change. To this end, the eight mechanisms of sensemaking were used as a lens to perform a case study conducted in the Recruitment department of a global pharmaceutical company to answer the research question:

How do organisations succeed with accelerated Digital Transformation?

By collecting data through semi-structured interviews with employees in several hierarchical levels of the Recruitment department, this study could get insights on what factors support and hinder accelerated DT. The findings show that sensemaking processes are important to enable accelerated DT, however, some were found to be more crucial than others. *Translation, Stay in motion, Encourage updating* and *Learning* seemed to have the biggest impact in speeding up the change. Middle management plays a crucial role in supporting employees' sensemaking processes. Thanks to the knowledge of their teams and their situational awareness, leaders are able to perform sensegiving and to select the most appropriate approach to each situation. Translating big plans into short-term goals that are understandable for the team is crucial to get people on board. Having a continuous shared focus on the change is what keeps employees working towards those goals and having an environment of open dialogue helps managers to promptly address issues along the way. Learning supports employees in making sense of a new system and in the long run it contributes to change employees' framework of thinking and way of working. This study shows that forcing DT through the implementation of many digital tools in a short period of time leads to technostress. Employees were struggling a lot to learn and adopt new systems on top of their ordinary job tasks. Technostress seemed to slow down the change process. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that accelerated DT requires time and effort and that it is necessary to have a good balance between innovation and efficiency to succeed with it. Lastly, this study shows that employees with certain capabilities succeeded better with fast changes. The identified capabilities were tech-savvy, learning agility and change mindset, it is therefore crucial to focus on the development of these capabilities.

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